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The Right to Read: An Open Letter to the Citizens of Our Country from the National Council of Teachers of English.

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Democracy can exist only in a climate in which teachers are free to teach and students are free to learn, a climate conducive to open inquiry and responsible discussion of any and all questions related to the ethical and cultural welfare of mankind. The right of an individual to read rests on the fundamental democratic assumption that an educated free man possesses powers of discrimination and should determine his own actions. To avoid objections from pressure groups, national or local book committees tend to carefully exclude from textbooks and reading lists those sections and volumes that offend such groups. Consequently, several American writers are inadequately represented in the public secondary schools. Cut off from many of the great ideas and feelings of Western man, a student is unlikely to develop into a free, reasoning person who can make up his own mind, who can understand his culture, and who can live compassionately with his fellowman. To preserve the unity of Western thought and culture, American citizens who care about the improvement of education are urged to join teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of trustees, and professional and scholarly organizations in supporting the students' right to read. (LH)

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An open letter to the citizens of our country from the National Council of Teachers of English:

THE RIGHT TO READ

It seems to me unlikely that a future citizen of a free country can be developed by education, in these days . . . without the devout study of great literature. Such study is probably essential because for many people a sense of values must be felt, not proved by argumentation. For these people, it seems to me, not philosophy but poetry--using the word in its widest sense--poetry alone can first open the doors of discrimination. As a rule emotional reactions--the sharpening or the blunting of our sense of values--are determined at an early age. For these reasons, you who teach [literature] in our schools and colleges . . . have a big responsibility for the future of this republic.

President James B. Conant
Harvard University: in an
address to the Modern Language
Association of America, 1940.

Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect . . . A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.

Justice William O. Douglas
United States Supreme Court:
Adler vs. Board of Education,
1952.

Teachers of English accept willingly the challenge from President Conant. Many are stifled, however, in the very atmosphere which Justice Douglas condemns. Pressures against books in classrooms and libraries are undermining

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education. Although in this statement we cannot set up a legal defense of the right of trained teachers to determine the best and most challenging reading for their students, we can affirm their professional right and responsibility to do so. We want to help create a climate in which teachers are free to teach and students are free to learn, a climate conducive to open inquiry and responsible discussion of any and all questions related to the ethical and cultural welfare of mankind.

The right of any individual to read is basic to democratic society. This right is based on the only tenable assumption for democratic living: that the educated free man possesses the powers of discrimination and is to be entrusted with the determination of his own actions.

The right to read, like all rights embedded in our constitutional traditions, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways education is an effort to improve the quality of the choices which are the exercise of this right. But to deny the opportunity of choice in the fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading and of individuals and groups to express their views for the guidance of others. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts by individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon a community at large.

In selecting books for reading by young people, teachers of English consider the contribution which each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its appropriateness to the curriculum, and its readability both in structure and content for a particular group of students. Many works of literature important in our culture contain isolated elements to which some

individuals may object. The literary artist is a seeker after truth, recording in structured form life as he perceives and feels it. As a creator, he must necessarily challenge at times the common beliefs or values of the culture, for creation is the process of identifying new relationships out of which come new meanings. In seeking honestly for meanings behind reality, the artist strives to achieve a work of art which is always basically moral, although not necessarily conventionally moral. Moreover, the value and impact of any literary work must be examined as a whole and not in part--the impact of the entire work transcending words, phrases, or incidents out of which it is made.

The teacher must exercise care to select works for class reading and group discussion which do not place students in a position of embarrassment in open discussion with their peers, but he must also be free to recommend for individual reading any work he feels will have educational significance for an individual student. In addition the teacher needs the freedom to discuss with a student any work that the student reads whether the teacher has recommended it or the student has discovered it for himself.

What a young reader gets from any literary selection depends both on the quality of the selection and on characteristics of the reader. Books must be chosen with awareness of the student, his reading ability, his mental and emotional maturity, and the values he may derive from the reading. Some books are clearly for ten-year-olds, while others may be more suitable for the middle teens. Good taste, common sense, and professional responsibility to students and to the humanistic tradition guide the teacher in making wise selections. The community that entrusts a classroom of students to the care of an English teacher should also trust that teacher to exercise a reasonable judgment in selecting books for student use.

THE THREAT TO EDUCATION

Censorship of books can leave American students with an inadequate grasp of the values and ideals of their culture. Writers are often the chief spokesmen of a culture. Yet, partly because of censorship or the fear of censorship, many important American writers are inadequately represented in the public secondary schools, and many are represented not by their best work but by their safest.

The censorship pressures that get the most publicity are those of small groups that protest the use of a limited number of books with realistic elements: Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, Catcher in the Rye, Brave New World, 1984, The Grapes of Wrath, to name a few. Frequently the victims are among our best teachers who, encouraged by the excellent literature newly accessible to students in inexpensive paperbacks, have ventured outside the narrow boundaries of conventional texts.

The greatest damage, however, is done by book committees appointed by national or local organizations to pore over anthologies, texts, or literary books solely to find sentences that advocate causes or concepts or practices these organizations condemn. As a result, some publishers, sensitive to possible objections, are careful to exclude from textbooks selections or sentences that might conceivably offend various groups.

Many well-meaning persons wish to restrict school reading to books that do not mention unsavory aspects of our society. They argue that children must not be exposed to books in which people drink or swear or do many of the things commonly featured in daily newspapers, on television, or in motion pictures. No more than the people who condemn these books are teachers interested in

promoting drinking and swearing. What the teacher sees as his responsibility, however, is to lead his students to understand all aspects of his culture and society--the good and the bad. This he can best do by cultivating in his students an appreciation for the wise and enduring thoughts of great writers. This he cannot do if major literary documents interpreting our culture are cut off from his students.

Because of outside pressures many English teachers cannot carry out their central responsibility: teaching the cultural heritage of Western civilization. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, to take just a few American examples, either are omitted completely or are inadequately represented in the high school curriculum. Teachers then are too often left with a small group of "nice" books that fail to excite students, emotionally or intellectually, about the pleasures of reading and the range of cultural perspectives that literature affords.

THE TEACHER'S PURPOSES

The purpose of education must remain what it has always been: to develop a free, reasoning person who can make up his own mind, who can understand his culture, and who can live compassionately with his fellow man.

Great literature raises the problems and questions that have perplexed man through all history: for example, the relationship between power and moral responsibility or the problem of undeserved human suffering. It presents the solutions and answers of the greatest minds the world has known. If the solutions and answers are not complete, they are the best we have. The continued search for answers is necessary. The conviction that solutions may be sought and judged is indispensable. When enough men lack this conviction, a great

tradition will pass away: that of seeing the whole of life without succumbing to fear.

The liberally educated person must recognize the basic values and understand the fundamental ideas of Western civilization. Its traditions are embodied in our culture, in our laws, in our religions. When the student learns to see great books, classic or contemporary, as metaphors for the whole of human experience, the study of literature contributes in a unique way to this understanding of these traditions. They help him to discover who he is and where he is going.

An abstraction may have little emotional impact. But the dramatization of an abstraction, of concepts and values, offers us something we can grasp. We begin to feel and understand the abstraction. As we read imaginative literature in English classes, we not only study the great ideas of Western men; we also share the feelings of <u>all</u> people in <u>all</u> times. In this imaginative search into the values and ideas of our culture lie both our humanity and our salvation. Those who do not remember the past, Santayana reminds us, are condemned to relive its mistakes.

THE COMMUNITY'S RESPONSIBILITY

American citizens who care about the improvement of education are urged to join teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of trustees, and professional and scholarly organizations in support of the students' right to read. Only widespread and informed support in every community can assure that--

* Enough citizens are interested in the development and maintenance of a superior school system to guarantee its achievement.
* Malicious gossip, ignorant rumors, and deceptive letters to the editor will not be circulated without challenge and correction.

* Newspapers will be convinced of public desires for objective school news reporting, free from slanting or editorial comment which destroys confidence in and support for schools.
* The community will not permit its resources and energy to be dissipated in conflicts created by groups striving to advance alien ideologies, narrow biases, or special interests.
* Faith in democratic traditions and processes will be maintained.

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